

Message Text

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P R 211615Z MAR 78
FM AMEMBASSY PARIS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8939
INFO ALL EC CAPITALS
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
AMEMBASSY MADRID
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USNMR SHAPE
USMISSION USNATO
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MILITARY ADDRESSEES ALSO FOR POLADS

USDOCOSOUTH FOR INTAF

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, FR

SUBJECT: ELECTIONS 1978: WHY THE LEFT FAILED

SUMMARY. THE LEFT, AND ESPECIALLY THE SOCIALIST PARTY (PS), FARED LESS WELL THAN EXPECTED IN THE LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS. WHY? THE ANSWER IS COMPLEX AND TENUOUS, BUT MAY BE FOUND IN SOME COMBINATION OF THE VARIOUS EXPLANATIONS OFFERED IN THIS TELEGRAM. FEAR OF COMMUNISTS IN GOVERNMENT WAS PROBABLY THE MOST IMPORTANT SINGLE FACTOR, BUT BY NO MEANS THE ONLY ONE. END SUMMARY.

1. FAILURE IN PROGRESS: THE PARTIES OF THE FRENCH LEFT EMERGED MARCH 19 AS THE BIGGEST LOSERS IN THE LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS, ALTHOUGH BOTH MAJOR COMPONENTS (PS AND PCF) GAINED IN THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY AND THE SOCIALISTS SHOWED THE GREATEST PERCENTAGE GAIN IN POPULAR VOTES ON THE FIRST ROUND. NONETHELESS, THE LEFT (AND ESPECIALLY THE SOCIALISTS) EXPECTED MUCH GREATER PROGRESS, IF NOT VICTORY ITSELF. LEFT HOPES WERE BASED NOT ONLY ON POLITICAL POLLS WHICH HAD SHOWN A POTENTIAL LEFT MAJORITY STEADILY FOR OVER A YEAR, BUT ALSO ON THE HARD POLITICAL FACTS OF CONTINUED SUCCESS IN CANTONAL AND MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS AS WELL AS LEGISLATIVE BY-ELECTIONS. WHAT WERE THE ELECTORAL REALITIES OF MARCH 19 WHICH ARE NOW CONSIDERED AS SIGNS OF FAILURE?:

-- TOTAL LEFT VOTE ON THE SECOND ROUND (49.3 PERCENT) DID NOT REACH 50 PERCENT; RATHER IT WAS
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SLIGHTLY LESS THAN THAT ATTAINED BY FRANCOIS MITTERRAND IN THE 1974 PRESIDENTIAL CONTEST (49.5);

-- IN COMPARISON WITH THE RESULTS OF THE MARCH 1977 MUNICIPALS, WHERE THE ELECTIONS INVOLVED ONLY THE URBAN ELECTORATE, LEFT STRENGTH DECLINED;

-- IN NUMBER OF DEPUTIES, THE LEFT PROGRESSED VERY LITTLE (15 PS, 14 PCF COMPARED WITH THE ASSEMBLY ELECTED IN 1973; 9 PS, 12 PCF COMPARED WITH THAT WHICH EXISTED IN MARCH 1978); BOTH GERRY-MANDERING AND LEFT URBAN CONCENTRATION ONCE AGAIN WORKED IN THE MAJORITY'S FAVOR, AS SHOWN IN THE NUMBER OF VOTES REQUIRED TO ELECT A DEPUTY FOR EACH PARTY (BASED ON SECOND ROUND VOTE DIVIDED BY NUMBER OF DEPUTIES ELECTED):

UDF	43,121
RPR	44,944
PCF	55,172
MRG	59,540
PS	70,028

2. THE RESULTS FOR BOTH COMMUNISTS AND SOCIALISTS ARE
PARADOXICAL:

- THE PCF LOST ONE PERCENTAGE POINT IN RELATION
TO THE 1973 ELECTIONS (FROM 21.4 TO 20.5 PER-
CENT) IN THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPORTANT POPULAR
VOTE, BUT MADE ITS BEST SHOWING SINCE 1956 IN
NUMBER OF DEPUTIES (86);
- THE PS PROGRESSED OVER THREE POINTS IN POPULAR
VOTE (19.2 TO 22.5), BUT DID RELATIVELY LESS
WELL IN ASSEMBLY SEATS WITH ONLY 103.

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PARTICULARLY FROM THE PS POINT OF VIEW, THE ELECTORAL OUTCOME WAS HIGHLY UNSATISFACTORY, AS PARTY SPECIALISTS, ALONG WITH POLLSTERS AND MOST OTHER OBSERVERS, HAD CONSIDERED 25 PERCENT ON THE FIRST ROUND AND 130 SEATS AS THE BARE MINIMUM FOR 1978. THE BIG QUESTION FOR THE SOCIALISTS IS WHAT HAPPENED TO THAT THREE PERCENT OR SO OF THE ELECTORATE WHICH ABANDONED THE PARTY ON MARCH 12 AND 19.

3. A LACK OF CREDIBILITY?: THE PS DIRECTING COMMITTEE OF MARCH 20 ISSUED A STATEMENT WHICH LAID THE BLAME FOR LEFT DEFEAT SOLELY ON THE COMMUNISTS FOR HAVING DESTROYED THE "LEFT DYNAMIC." THERE IS NO QUESTION THAT LEFT DISUNITY AND INTER-PARTY POLEMICS SINCE LAST SEPTEMBER DISCOURAGED A PART OF THE ELECTORATE WHO LOST FAITH IN THE CREDIBILITY OF LEFT PROMISES. THE MAJORITY HAMMERED CONSTANTLY AT THIS THEME, CONTINUALLY QUESTIONING HOW SOCIALISTS AND COMMUNISTS COULD EVER REALLY HOPE TO GOVERN TOGETHER.

4. THE RAPID PAPERING-OVER OF ALLEGEDLY FUNDAMENTAL DIFFERENCES ON MARCH 13 DID LITTLE TO RESTORE PUBLIC CONFIDENCE AND IN FACT PROBABLY EXACERBATED THE PROBLEM. FOR MANY LEFT SUPPORTERS, THE "POLITICAL ACCORD" AND SUD-DEN RAPPROCHEMENT WERE HYPOCRITICAL, BLATANTLY OPPORTUNISTIC, TRANSPARENT ACTS OF POLITICAL MANIPULATION -- IN SHORT, A MASQUERADE. FOR CENTRIST-ORIENTED VOTERS, LEFT "SHOW BUSINESS" HARDLY INSTILLED CONFIDENCE, PARTICULARLY WHEN THE FIRST ROUND HAD NOT PRODUCED A CLEARLY DOMINANT SOCIALIST PRESENCE WITHIN THE LEFT.
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5. ECONOMIC ISSUES: THE MARCH 13 LEFT AGREEMENT ALSO IGNORED THE MAJOR ECONOMIC ISSUES, NAMELY NATIONALIZA-

TIONS, WHICH HAD SEPARATED SOCIALISTS AND COMMUNISTS FOR MONTHS. THE MAJORITY IN GENERAL, AND PARTICULARLY PRIME MINISTER BARRE, HAD REPEATED INCESSANTLY THAT LEFT ECONOMIC PROGRAMS WOULD BRING INFLATION, HIGHER UNEMPLOYMENT AND PROTECTIONISM. GISCARD CENTERED HIS TWO "RIGHT CHOICE" SPEECHES ON THE SAME ISSUE, MAINTAINING THAT THE ECONOMY, WHILE PROGRESSING, WAS TOO FRAGILE TO SUSTAIN THE SHOCK OF LEFT PROPOSALS. IN THE FACE OF SUCH DIRE PREDICTIONS AND THE CONFLICTING IDEAS OF THE LEFT PARTNERS, A GOODLY NUMBER OF FRENCHMEN NO DOUBT DECIDED THAT THE PROMISES OF AN ELEVATED MINIMUM WAGE, ETC., WERE SIMPLY NOT WORTH THE RISKS INVOLVED.

6. LOSS OF IDENTITY: A NUMBER OF PS LEADERS ARE LREADY CRITICIZING THE COMMON PROGRAM AS AN ELECTORAL STRATEGY BECAUSE IT TIED THE SOCIALISTS TOO CLOSELY TO THE PCF AND BECAME AN INFLEXIBLE SORT OF DOGMA AS THE PS TRIED TO REFUTE COMMUNIST CHARGES OF INFIDELITY. MICHEL ROCARD CLAIMS THAT THE PS ERRED IN "PRIVILEGING THE QUANTITATIVE OVER THE QUALITATIVE", E.G., IN GIVING IN ON THE MINIMUM WAGE AT 2,400 FRANCS, AND IN SO DOING LOST ITS IDENTITY, ITS CREDIBILITY AND HENCE A PART OF ITS ELECTORATE. PARTY NUMBER TWO PIERRE MAUROY AGREES THAT THE COMMON PROGRAM TIED THE PS TO INFLEXIBLE POSITIONS, PREVENTING IT FROM PURSUING ITS OWN LOGIC.

7. SOCIALIST PARTY AND SOCIAL-DEMOCRATIC ELECTORATE?: IN THE SAME VEIN, SOME OBSERVERS ARGUE THAT THE IDEOLOGICAL BASE OF THE PS WAS SIMPLY TOO NARROW TO SUPPORT THE ELECTORAL SUPERSTRUCTURE BEING BUILT UPON IT. IN DEVELOPING A RIGOROUSLY "SOCIALIST" (AS OPPOSED TO SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC) IDEOLOGY, THE SOCIALISTS EFFECTIVELY LAID THE THEORETICAL GROUNDWORK UPON WHICH A POTENT PARTY

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ORGANIZATION COULD BE STRUCTURED, BUT WHICH ULTIMATELY DID NOT CORRESPOND TO THE ASPIRATIONS OF A PART OF ITS ELECTORATE COMPOSED OF DISILLUSIONED CENTRISTS AND TRUE SOCIAL DEMOCRATS. SUCH SUPPORTERS PROBABLY BELIEVED THAT SOONER OR LATER THE PS WOULD MOVE AWAY FROM MORE ORTHODOX SOCIALISM AND HENCE FROM THE COMMUNISTS -- SUCH WAS NOT THE CASE BY MARCH 1978 AND THESE FRENCHMEN ABANDONED SHIP.

8. ANTI-COMMUNISM: INTERMINGLED WITH ALMOST EVERY RATIONALE FOR PS FAILURE IS A CERTAIN MEASURE OF ANTI-COMMUNISM. IN THE EXTREME CASE, SOME OBSERVERS CONSIDER THE ELECTION RESULTS AS A PURE AND SIMPLE REJECTION OF COMMUNISM; IN OUR VIEW, THIS IS THE BIGGEST, BUT NOT THE ONLY REASON. PCF INTRANSIGENCE OVER THE PAST SIX

MONTHS DID NOTHING TO MOLLIFY THE REMAINING CONCERNS OF
MARGINAL VOTERS WHO MIGHT HAVE BEEN WILLING TO GIVE THE
"NEW" PCF THE BENEFIT OF DOUBT. THE PCF'S INSISTENCE IN

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THE CLOSING WEEKS OF THE ELECTORAL PERIOD THAT IT WOULD HAVE MINISTERS IN A LEFT GOVERNMENT ALSO REINFORCED SUCH HESITATIONS AS DID THE GENERALLY AGGRESSIVE TELEVISION PERFORMANCES OF GEORGES MARCHAIS (ACCORDING TO SOME REPORTS, THE GOF ACTUALLY DIRECTED THE STATE-CONTROLLED MEDIA TO GIVE MARCHAIS AS MUCH COVERAGE AS POSSIBLE DURING THE LATTER PART OF THE CAMPAIGN).

9. TELEVISION AND THE UDF: THE TELEVISION CAMPAIGN ALSO SERVED TO PUBLICIZE THE SOCIALISTS' MAJOR COMPETITOR FOR THE CENTRIST VOTE, THE UDF, CREATED ONLY SHORTLY BEFORE THE ELECTION AND LACKING IDENTITY FOR MANY FRENCHMEN. AT THE SAME TIME, THE PS PROBABLY FAILED TO USE MITTERRAND ENOUGH ON TV, CHOOSING INSTEAD TO PUBLICIZE OTHER CANDIDATES AND CONSEQUENTLY LOSING SOME LAST OPPORTUNITIES TO REAFFIRM THE IDENTITY OF THE PARTY THROUGH ITS MOST POPULAR PERSONALITY.

10. GISCARD TALKS AND CHIRAC STUMPS: THE PRESIDENT SPOKE FEBRUARY 27 AT VERDUN-SUR-LE-DOUBS AND THEN MARCH 11 ON THE EVE OF THE FIRST ROUND, WARNING FRENCHMEN ON THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE CHOICE THEY WERE ABOUT TO MAKE. HIS PERSONAL POPULARITY, 40 PERCENT AT THE TIME OF THE MARCH 1977 MUNICIPALS, HAD RISEN TO 56 PERCENT IN EARLY MARCH 1978 -- SOME VOTERS MUST HAVE BEEN LISTENING. THE SAME WARNINGS, BUT IN EVEN STRONGER TERMS, WERE BEING SOUNDED ALL OVER THE COUNTRY BY RPR LEADER CHIRAC. HIS SIX-MONTH CAMPAIGN BROUGHT HIM INTO PERSONAL CONTACT WITH OVER A MILLION VOTERS. AND WHILE THIS TECHNIQUE MAY HAVE BEEN DIFFICULT FOR POLLSTERS TO MEASURE, THE RPR

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SCORE SHOWS IT HAD A POSITIVE EFFECT.

11. ELECTORAL FACTORS: FINALLY, A NUMBER OF ELECTORAL CONSIDERATIONS WORKED AGAINST THE PS ON BOTH MARCH 12 AND 19:

- CAST AS A "CHOICE OF SOCIETY", THE ELECTORATE WAS MOBILIZED AS NEVER BEFORE, WITH RECORD TURN-OUTS ON BOTH ROUNDS (83 AND 85 PERCENT). THE TWO PERCENT "MAJORITY RESERVE" ON THE SECOND

ROUND SWUNG MANY SEATS TO THE MAJORITY SIDE;
-- MOBILIZATION INCLUDED GREATER THAN EXPECTED
NUMBERS OF ELDERLY VOTERS WHO LEANED VERY
HEAVILY TOWARD MAJORITY CANDIDATES. GOOD
WEATHER ON BOTH DAYS HELPED TO INCREASE THIS
VOTE;
-- ELECTORAL OBSERVERS TELL US THAT THE YOUTH VOTE
LEANED SLIGHTLY LEFT, BUT DID NOT VOTE OVER-
WHELMINGLY LEFT AS HAD BEEN PREDICTED. IN
GENERAL, A LARGE PART OF THIS VOTE APPARENTLY
FOLLOWED THE EXAMPLE SET BY PARENTS AND GRAND-
PARENTS AND THUS STAYED RELATIVELY CLOSE TO
THE NATIONAL TREND;
-- THE MARGINAL VOTERS OF THE FIRST ROUND (ECOLO-
GISTS, WOMEN'S AND REGIONAL MOVEMENTS, ETC.)
SPLIT ABOUT EVENLY BETWEEN LEFT AND RIGHT AND
DID NOT PROVIDE (IN MOST CASES) A LEFT RESERVE
FOR THE SECOND ROUND.

12. TRANSFER OF VOTERS: THE HIGHER RATE OF PARTICIPA-
TION ON MARCH 19, INCLUDING 300,000 NEW VOTERS, MAKES
ANALYSIS OF VOTE TRANSFER DIFFICULT, ALTHOUGH PRELIMINA-
RY STATISTICS ARE AVAILABLE (PARIS 9460). HOWEVER, CER-
TAIN TRENDS ARE EVIDENT:

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- PS SUPPORTERS WERE GENERALLY RELUCTANT TO VOTE PCF ON THE SECOND ROUND, RESULTING IN NUMEROUS COMMUNIST LOSSES WHERE THE COMBINED LEFT VOTE ON MARCH 12 HAD FAR EXCEEDED 50 PERCENT. SOCIALIST RELUCTANCE IS TRADITIONAL, BUT WAS NO DOUBT STRENGTHENED BY PCF POLEMICS IN THE PRE-ELECTORAL PERIOD;
- PCF SUPPORTERS WERE MORE DISCIPLINED, EVEN THOUGH MUCH LESS SO IN CERTAIN CASES THAN BEFORE, DIRECTLY CAUSING A SMALL NUMBER OF PS LOSSES. IN SOME HIGHLY PUBLICIZED CASES, SUCH AS THAT OF MICHEL ROCARD, THE PCF TRANSFER WAS EXTREMELY GOOD;
- MAJORITY TRANSFER WAS EXCELLENT IN ALL DIRECTIONS, AS THE RPR RECEIVED GOOD UDF SUPPORT, THUS INDICATING FEWER DEFECTIONS THAN EXPECTED TO THE SOCIALISTS.

13. THE DECISIVE ROUND COMES EARLY: THE OLD ELECTORAL SAYING GOES, "ON THE FIRST ROUND ONE ELIMINATES, ON THE SECOND ONE DECIDES." IN FACT, MANY VOTERS SEEM TO HAVE TREATED THE FIRST ROUND IN 1978 AS THE "DECISIVE" ROUND, THUS CUTTING THE PS PERCENTAGE AND DESTROYING THE POSSIBILITY OF A LEFT SNOWBALL. SOME ARGUE THAT THE MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS, HIGHLY POLITICIZED, SERVED AS THE FIRST

ROUND, GIVING A LESSON TO THE CURRENT MAJORITY. OTHERS SAY THAT THE MONTHS OF POLLS FAVORABLE TO THE LEFT FUNCTIONED AS A FIRST ROUND.

14. THREE PERCENT HOLE: IN ANY CASE, THE PS SUFFERED
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IN COMPARISON WITH ITS EXPECTATIONS. PERHAPS THESE EXPECTATIONS WERE SIMPLY MUCH TOO HIGH. THE SOFRES POLL OF MARCH 1 SHOWED THE PS/MRG AT 28 PERCENT; BUT AT THE SAME TIME, 13 PERCENT OF THAT 28 PERCENT SAID THAT, IN THEIR HEART, THEY HOPED THE MAJORITY WOULD WIN. PREVIOUS ELECTIONS (MUNICIPALS, CANTONALS, ETC.) HAD SHOWN THAT MOST OF THAT CONTRADICTIONARY VOTE WOULD REMAIN FAITHFUL TO ITS DECLARED PS INTENTIONS. IN MARCH 1978, HOWEVER, IT MAY WELL HAVE DUG THE THREE PERCENT HOLE BETWEEN EXPECTATIONS AND REALITY.

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